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ABSTRACT

During the summer of 1998, Florida Gulf Coast University (FGCU) invented a new way to earn an Educational Technology Master's degree. Founded in 1997 as a university dedicated to utilizing new technologies for both local and distance learning, FGCU's School of Education has enabled learners from across the state to complete a degree program in just 13 months, in large part from their own homes. Utilizing a new model combining traditional World Wide Web-based distance learning with two conference-style in-residence sessions, students gain the benefits of both distance and face-to-face teaching techniques. The two conferences are known as "Tech-Ins" and last three weeks each. This paper discusses the development of the program, the first Tech-In, and reports on the status of the students in the cohort near the conclusion of the fall 1998 semester. (Author/AEF)

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Three Weeks at Camp Ed-Tech: Finding A New Model for the Educational Technology Master's Program

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Abstract: During the summer of 1998, Florida Gulf Coast University invented a new way to earn an Educational Technology Master's degree. Founded in 1997 as a university dedicated to utilizing new technologies for both local and distance learning, FGCU's School of Education has enabled learners from across the state to complete a degree program in just 13-months, in large part from their own home. Utilizing a new model combining traditional web-based distance learning with two, conference-style in-residence sessions, students gain the benefits of both distance and face-to-face teaching techniques. The two conferences are known as "Tech-In's" and last three-weeks each. This paper discusses the development of the program, the first Tech-In, and reports on the status of the students in the cohort near the conclusion of the fall 1998 semester.

Introduction

Florida Gulf Coast University is a brand new university, having opened its doors for the first classes on August 25, 1997. Many of the faculty at FGCU are new to Florida, arriving from other institutions with the intention of creating new programs for the 21st Century. As part of that Inaugural Faculty, I looked forward to being involved in the creation of an innovative program for Educational Technology - a new way to serve the dire technology needs of the public schools in our country. As the first semester progressed, a few of us "techies" began to wonder how we might integrate Distance Learning into our program, including considering putting the entire program on-line. (FGCU's administration is committed to serving 25% of its student enrollment via Distance Learning technologies.) Continued discussion lead us to believe that it would not be possible to put every course on-line, nor did we think we wanted to. But we were still faced with the desire to serve a population much wider than could easily commute to Fort Myers. The result is the "FGCU Ed-Tech Program" through which students can earn a 38-credit master's degree in just 13 months. This paper discusses the background, design, development and implementation of this program, now in its first year.

Background

Unlike most of the programs at Florida Gulf Coast University (FGCU), the School of Education (SoE) did not start from scratch on opening day in 1997. In fact, our programs were already filled nearly to capacity because the opening of FGCU meant the closing of the Fort Myers branch campus of the University of South Florida (USF). USF Fort Myers had been a significant teacher education institution in Southwest Florida for many years. Hundreds of students were in the midst of their undergraduate or graduate programs. These transition students were able to earn either USF or FGCU degrees. To earn an FGCU degree, undergraduates needed to take a few specialized FGCU courses, but graduate students just needed to make a choice. This transition period, however, meant that our curriculums could not change significantly during the first few years. And, until the *entire* faculty had arrived in Fort Myers to participate, little program development could take place anyway.

At USF Fort Myers, and now at FGCU, the "Educational Technology" degree is actually a

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concentration of the Curriculum and Instruction master's program This imported degree is a 38-credit program, which includes a 17-credit Curriculum and Instruction core and 21 credits of courses in the concentration. Interestingly, of the seven concentration courses, only two are absolutely required. The other five fall into two "variable title" courses which students repeat for credit. There are both benefits and drawbacks to this arrangement. The most important benefit for us at this point in the transition process was the broad flexibility to select a set of five courses for a new program without having to seek university or state-level approval.

Design

The unique nature of being involved with a new university, and the knowledge that all of our programs will eventually be reconsidered and redesigned, allows for in interesting level of creative contemplation about the nature of our curriculum. Because of the university's focus on distance learning, our significant level of start-of-the-art technology, and the geographically dispersed nature of the students in our five county service region, the direction our program should take was fairly clear.

The first conception of the program came from Dr. Bill Engel. His idea was for a full Distance Learning program. He envisioned a program where students would take all 38 credits via distance technologies. Without changing the two required courses in our program, however, this would be difficult. Effectively teaching the required course about computer hardware and networking, we decided, would be significantly less effective in a distance learning situation. We also consider this course essential to the program, and would probably not choose to delete the course when the program is revised. This first idea was soon dismissed as unworkable so we looked for other creative solutions.

In my experience at the master's level I participated in two, two-week intensive courses. Wondering if it might work for our program, we started playing around with the idea. After a few days, I realized that if we had *two*, nine-credit intensive programs we might be able to offer our entire degree program in one year. From this we expanded the idea to include two, three-week session's in consecutive summers, along with 20 credits of distance learning courses between the two on-campus sessions. This design allows students from outlying areas to spend three-weeks "in residence" and then complete the remainder of their program at home while maintaining "normal" family and work schedules. Bill coined this potential idea a "Tech-In" and the name stuck.

Development and Implementation

Two barriers stood in the way of initial success: fully conceptualizing the idea and actually creating and pulling-off a Tech-In. Surprisingly, there was little or no administrative resistance. As we talked about our program idea around campus, it soon turned into a "high-profile" undertaking with both encouragement and financial support from the highest levels of the university. The unique fit into the administration's conception of "distance learning" and the potential to increase our distance enrollment clearly earned that support! Of course, when real money followed words of support, we were then able to begin putting the program together.

Early in the spring semester of 1998 we had a working plan: two summer Tech-In's of 9 credits each, separated by a year of distance learning, web-based courses for 20 credits, totaling the program's 38 credit requirement. A variety of issues needed to be worked out quickly, i.e., Which courses would be taught at the Tech-In's and which via the Web? In what order would the courses be presented? Do we operate it as a cohort program, with only one, yearly entry point? What about students already in our program? The summer Tech-In's presented additional issues. During the first summer we did not have residence halls available on campus, so one of the biggest problems was housing. Other issues were food (the dining hall closed at 4pm every day), a daily schedule, what to do about the July Fourth holiday, and getting a computer lab dedicated to our classes for a three-week span. Working through these issues put us further and further into the spring semester so we became unable to admit new students to the degree program in time to attend the Tech-In. This forced us to allow students to attend as non-degree seeking students until their applications were fully processed.

The curriculum in place for our degree program consists of five "Foundation" courses and seven

"Technology" courses. Discussing with the faculty for the foundation courses, we picked the two courses likely to be the most difficult to transfer to a distance learning, web-based format. Each of these two courses was assigned to a Tech-In, and the remaining three were slated for distance delivery in fall, spring, and early summer. The technology curriculum has two required courses, Instructional Design and Hardware Systems, and five "elective" courses. These elective courses must be chosen from two, variable-title, course numbers (EME 6936 and EME 6930). This powerful flexibility allowed us to create courses that could compliment and build on one-another as students progressed thought the program. Two variable-title courses were assigned to the first Tech-In, and a variable-title programming course, along with the required Hardware course were assigned to the second Tech-In. The remaining courses were spread throughout the year (Table 1).

1998 - 1999 Course Schedule

Semester	Course	Course Title
Tech-In '98	EME 6936	Building and Managing a Web Server
On Campus	EME 6936	Multimedia Tools for the Web
	EDF 6432	Foundations of Measurement
Jul/Aug 98 *Web*	EME 6936	Enhancing Instruction: Mindtools for Critical Thinking
Fall 98	EDF 6284	Problems in Instructional Design for Microcomputers
Web	EDF 6215	Learning Principles Applied to Instruction
Spring 99 *Web*	EME 6936/ EME 6930	Elective or Independent Study
	EDF 6481	Foundations of Educational Research
May/Jun 99 *Web*	EDG 6627	Foundations of Curriculum and Instruction
Tech-In '99	CGS 6210	Microcomputer Hardware Systems for Education
On Campus	EME 6930	Programming for the Web
	EDF 6606	Socio-Economic Foundations of American Education

Table 1: Original 1998-1999 Ed-Tech program schedule.

Once we had decided on the curriculum, the political decisions followed close behind. With a great amount of discussion, we decided that to participate in any of the distance-learning courses, students would need to attend the first Tech-In. We reasoned that the Tech-In would unify the students into a cohort and would allow them to continue to work very closely, even over the web. "New" students would not be known by the group and would work against the atmosphere we hoped to create. It was also decided that students already in our program would be allowed to attend the Tech-In's, and join the cohort, only if they needed all three courses, or could substitute the Independent Study for one of the classes.

One of the most important parts of the plan was to create an "executive degree program" atmosphere for the students. As a brand new university, there was still a lot of disorganization. Worse yet, there were no residence halls or conference services to assist the development of the program. Any atmosphere and structure we hoped to create, we needed to create on our own. Creating the "executive" atmosphere began with our advertising and application procedure. A web site was created in early January to fully describe the program and the procedure for applying. An on-line application was programmed and was made available in early April. Surprisingly little direct advertising was necessary, and, by the week prior to the Tech-In, the program was one seat from being full. Unfortunately, because we had not been able to complete the entire admission process for the students prior to the Tech-In, we had a significant number of no-shows. Still, on June 21, 1998, 22 students arrived on the now one-year old FGCU campus for the first three-week Tech-In.

The Tech-In

We believe that the most unique and innovative aspect of our program is the Tech-In. Students begin and end their Ed-Tech master's degree program with Tech-In's, the only "in-residence" portions of their year. Clearly, a lot rides on the experiences of each three-week session.

The first Tech-In (summer 1998) consisted of three, three-credit courses spread over three-weeks. Arriving on Sunday night for an orientation, students picked their workstations and got to know one another, ready for a flying start at 8:30 the next morning. For 14 days (not including weekends and an extra day off for the July 4th holiday) students worked diligently from 8:30 am to 10:00 pm on their three rigorous courses. As planned, two of the courses were technology concentration courses, focusing on the World Wide Web, and designed specifically to compliment each other. The third course was a foundations course. Students were provided with one-hour per class work time as well as time for lunch and for dinner. The remaining time was spent in session.

All sessions were held in the same 30-seat computer lab. Since so much time was spent in this room, the students essentially "moved in" and fondly dubbed it "The Dungeon." One student even donated the use of a small refrigerator, which conveniently stored the snack food and caffinated soda it took to get through the long hours.

During the first two days, students installed and began managing an NT Server computer in a domain atmosphere, installed and began setting up Microsoft's Internet Information Server 4.0 (IIS 4.0), and installed and utilized a multitude of application software. With a lab full of servers, students were able to develop their understanding of server management rather quickly. Once their servers were stable, the students developed multi-media based web sites and learned to manage the variety of chores that accompany web site construction and hosting.

During the second Tech-In students will put together new computers from parts, and then re-install NT Server, IIS 4.0, and the applications. From there they will study hardware and network issues in great depth and construct interactive web sites using ASP technology.

The first Tech-In was an academic experience unlike any that I have been involved with. It would be nice to say that the powerful, cooperative atmosphere that developed was exactly what we had planned. But honesty must note that it was much better than we had even hoped for. Managed from the start as a complete "conference" rather than just three classes strung together, we worked very hard to create a productive environment. Interpersonal dynamics can never be counted on, so we were fortunate to have 22 students who formed a very tight-nit, supportive group. And we facilitated the experience with the psychology of group-dynamics very much in mind.

The success and power of the Tech-In is reflected in the following comments from students:

> I am so glad I had this experience. This tech-in will probably be one of the most important professional events of my life. It has opened my mind up to so many opportunities and possibilities.
>
> Developing and learning together, the 22 (plus the 3 of you) of us became a village, a community with shared interests. I feel privileged to have been a part of this.
>
> It was exciting, frustrating, exhausting, and I'd do it again in a heartbeat..... after I recover from the sleep deprivation.

The Rest of the Year

Leaving the Tech-In on a Friday evening, most of the students were back in class by Wednesday. Only this time it was the virtual classroom of the World Wide Web. With 20 credits to complete in just 11 months, it was important to get right back to business. The first distance learning course was scheduled from mid-July through the end of August, and presented the *Mindtool's* philosophy of utilizing computers in the classroom (Jonassen 1996). Managed as a seminar, students read the text and then discussed it with classmates on a discussion list. The class was facilitated with *Web Course in a Box* and supplemented with audio "lectures" utilizing streaming media.

Beginning nearly as well as the Tech-In had ended, this first distance learning course continued the powerful learning environment that had developed over the previous three weeks. Taking a cohort of

students who know each other so well into a distance learning course was a wonderful experience. Having no need to "test the waters" and learn about one another, the virtual discussion's got off to a fast start. Unfortunately, the class also introduced the first significant problems for our cohort. Returning to the many responsibilities each student faced at home, some students were unable to participate to the level required in a six-week course. In addition, the first significant planning error surfaced. As students were completing the first course, and preparing to begin the two fall courses, most of them were also trying to begin a new school year as teachers. The frustration of the students, along with the difficulty of the two fall courses caused a few students to drop one or the other fall course. But with flexibility, we were able to relieve some of the pressure on the students, and, as of this writing, most students completed the fall semester courses successfully.

New plans for the next cohort of students during the 1999-2000 academic year have been proposed based on the feedback of students. The most significant change in the schedule is the overlapping of courses, and the more even distribution over the courses over the year. We realized that when running a cohort program, there was little need to remain constrained by the traditional university schedule. Next year, only one course will be commencing at the same time as the fall semester in public schools is beginning. And one course will span the fall and spring semesters, running from October through February (Figure 1). We hope that these changes allow students to focus on their coursework more completely.

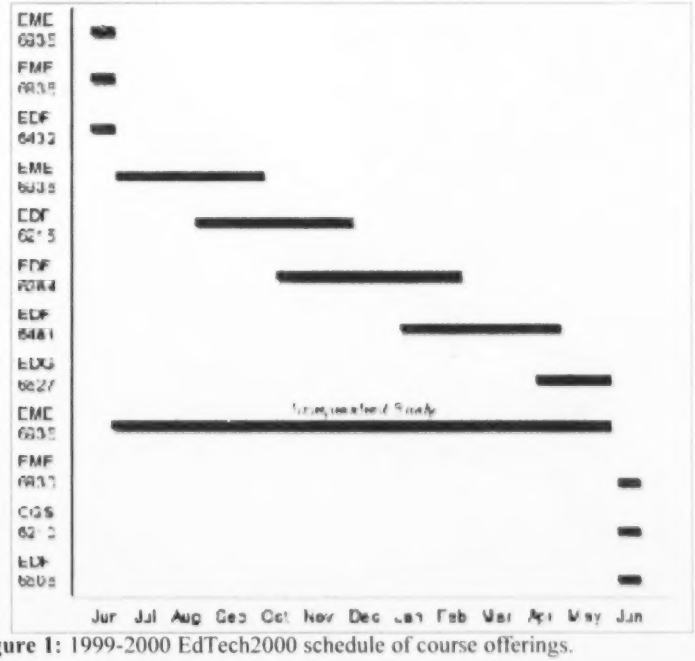

Figure 1: 1999-2000 EdTech2000 schedule of course offerings.

Conclusion

The Educational Technology program at Florida Gulf Coast University was fortunate to begin with curriculum that allowed considerable flexibility and an administration that fostered innovation in program development. Many of the faculty at FGCU chose to move to this institution to be part of creating something new and interesting. We believe that the 13-month Ed-Tech program is a good example of this type of unique innovation.

Though still running its course for the first year, feedback from the students continues to be very positive. Attrition is becoming a potential problem, but is avoidable in the future with a change in scheduling philosophy for upcoming years. By the date this paper is presented at the SITE '99 conference, we will be well past the half-way mark and will have much more information to share.

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